

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 13, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd Austin
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20302

Dear Secretary Austin:

Thank you for quickly ordering a department-wide stand down to discuss extremism. The growing challenges our democracy faces from extremism, misinformation campaigns, disinformation operations, and conspiracy theories are at the forefront of all our minds, especially after the events on January 6, 2021 at the Capitol. We believe that the Department should implement mandatory training on digital literacy and cyber citizenship to help with this problem.

The prevalence with which inaccurate information has infiltrated our online social networks and news sources is fueling extremism at an alarming rate, and the military is no exception. In 2020, the FBI informed the Pentagon of 143 investigations into current and former military members, with 68 pertaining to domestic extremism cases. In 2019, *The Military Times* found that 36% of its active-duty readers surveyed had seen "evidence of white supremacist and racist ideologies in the military," up from 22% one year earlier. Further, a recent NPR analysis found that nearly 1 in 5 charged in the aftermath of the Capitol siege appeared to have a military history. Two weeks after the Capitol insurrection, roughly a dozen National Guard troops were dismissed from inauguration duties — at least two for alleged links to extremism. These troubling statistics lead us to ask how we can better address the issues of extremism and eradicate it within not just our communities but within the armed services.

We must get ahead of this situation by continuing to educate our defense workforce beyond a singular stand-down. That is the only hope of improving the culture and knowledge base of our forces. We should look to incorporate training on misinformation, disinformation, and extremism into annual requirements for all service members and DoD civilian personnel.

In identifying the best ways to educate our forces, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace recently gathered 85 proposals made by 51 different organizations exploring what needed to be done to battle against the online forces of mis- and disinformation. By far the most frequently recommended policy action was to improve the “digital literacy” of those who consume that information. Increasing digital literacy and cyber citizenship skills are at the core of meeting these challenges head on.

Training on cyber citizenship and digital literacy will teach our forces how to analyze and evaluate information sources to determine whether the information is accurate or if it has been

manipulated. We all must improve our skills in learning to distinguish between real and fake information. Every day, millions of servicemembers and DoD civilian personnel use social media. Not surprisingly, they are routinely exposed to the viral spread of false information. The effects on them and the military could affect operational security, force readiness and reputation, and even the physical and mental health of servicemembers if there is a lack of understanding of how to identify and respond to false information.

Your “Stand Down” memo earlier this year noted that “this stand-down is just the first initiative of...a concerted effort to better educate ourselves and our people about the scope of this problem and to develop sustainable ways to eliminate the corrosive effects that extremist ideology and conduct have on the workforce.” We write to ask that the Department of Defense implement annual training on “digital literacy” and “cyber citizenship” as this is an essential and maintainable step to keep our personnel educated on how to identify misleading information, further protecting and insulating our forces from extremist and conspiracy ideologies. Should the Department need legislative authorization or other backing from Congress to support this effort, we stand ready to assist.

Sincerely,



CHRISSY HOULAHAN
Member of Congress



JACKIE SPEIER
Member of Congress



ELISSA SLOTKIN
Member of Congress



VERONICA ESCOBAR
Member of Congress



MARC VEASEY
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